

Analytic Philosophy Is Not Philosophy

Part 1: Ontological Analytics and Imaginary Metaphysics

I mean this only in the same way that I would say pleasure is not goodness. Pleasure is, of course, a type of goodness, but it is not synonymous with it. Similarly, analytic philosophy is a type of philosophy, but it is not its entirety. I know this is obvious, but it is a point that nonetheless justifies this provocative title, since in the English-speaking world philosophy students are often exposed to analytic philosophy as though it were the only meaningful approach. There are of course occasional nods in the continental direction, but these styles are rarely engaged with seriously on their own terms.

More often, they are filtered, translated, or evaluated according to analytic standards, and in that sense are absorbed in a way that undermines their integrity rather than given serious consideration. The reason for this has to do with what people think philosophy is for, and what people think its methods ought to be.

I'd like to offer an example to illustrate something of the analytic answer to these questions of purpose and method. I recently came across an essay that explicitly aimed to redefine philosophy in purely analytic terms. The author argued that philosophy would be better renamed "the love of reasons" rather than "the love of wisdom". I found myself agreeing wholeheartedly, but with an important distinction: that this rebranding not be applied wholesale, to branches of philosophy that the author has no jurisdiction over, but simply to the analytic kind of philosophy that they were trained in. This is exactly the kind of assumption about what philosophy means that I am taking issue with here.

I think that if a philosopher is not actively pursuing wisdom, then absolutely, they are not exactly doing what the word philosophy implies, and should probably be using a different word for their activities. Philology would be the closest fit, but is regrettably already taken. My suggestion would be *conceptual logicians*: constructing, refining, and optimising conceptual and logical frameworks without needing to reference them to the realities of life too much.

I am going to be discussing a fully endorsed approach to ontology in analytic philosophy that takes rationalism to a strange and unnecessary extreme. It allows for the invention of imagined circumstances and conditions that are completely divorced from any context, experience, or empirical data, and then takes conclusions drawn from those fictions seriously. The irony of course is that analytic philosophy was supposed to be all about eliminating speculative thinking from philosophy and yet now certifies a more removed and implausible version of it.

In case it is not clear, let me state it here before moving on. It is not the rational faculty as a source of knowledge that I am critical of. That would be naïve, to say the least. I am talking about a specific misapplication of reason, reason in isolation. For example, considering a mind without reference to neuroscience or evolutionary biology, or considering morality according to what words mean rather than human experience.

I have been thinking along these lines for some time. My A-Level Philosophy students do not really encounter any other kind of philosophy unless I go out of my way to introduce it to them, which they really do not like me doing since it is unexaminable. For our young philosophers, analytic philosophy effectively *is* philosophy, a pattern repeated across the majority of our universities and learning institutions.

I would not object to this if analytic philosophy were demonstrably the most effective kind. If, for example, it had produced a coherent and cumulative body of knowledge concerning the central questions of existence and life, or if it had developed reliable and wide-ranging methods for determining truth, or even if it had generated ideas that genuinely inspired and guided people in how to live, helping them move towards greater goodness and wisdom.

None of this is the case.

Ontological Analytics

I would like to begin with a challenge: if *ontological analytics* has produced even one single substantive and broadly agreed-upon truth about what we are, what exists, or how we should live, since the days of Ayer, I would genuinely like to hear about it. I have been waiting. My students have been waiting. At times, it feels as though the world is waiting. I posted a similar challenge on a forum of analytic philosophers once. I received a lot of condescension, misdirection and personal insults, but I did not receive a single answer to my question.

You may also think I am being unfair, since this lack of confirmed knowledge applies to all branches of philosophy. In a way that is true, but it also misses the point. In traditions such as phenomenology and existentialism, for example, the aim is not to establish definite ontological truths. Instead, they seek to offer interpretations of the challenges of being alive in the modern world, providing frameworks of understanding that help us make sense of ourselves. They are based on a different understanding of what philosophy is for. Specifically, they take the role of the philosopher, the reflective thinker, to be that of helping others to understand their lives and their world, and the challenges and complexity they live with. They do not tend to believe that we can do that by constructing leaky propositional arguments. I agree with them completely.

So if such branches of philosophy have not offered propositional arguments to support a particular intellectual position, it is because those philosophers do not recognise this as an effective way of doing philosophy. They may argue, as I do, that such activities are doomed to failure, that deductive reasoning will never reveal a new ontological fact, that all rational arguments will contain significant flaws, and that attempts to construct propositional truths from logic can only serve to conceal and distract us from what philosophy could instead be doing, namely being useful.

For example, philosophy ought to be preparing us for the new and almost unrecognisably different world that our culture and technology are now presenting to us. As a species with unprecedented power over our environment and ourselves, we are facing forms of agency and responsibility for which our existing frameworks are increasingly inadequate. Philosophy

could also be helping us to reframe our lived experience in order to find meaning in a fragmented and confusing world, or offering a shared framework of meaning and value to politicians and citizens alike.

Instead, a dominant and high-profile cohort of analytic philosophers are refining concepts in the hope that they will one day add up to evidence asserting something about mind, metaphysics, or morality. The problem is that this method has systematically, and over many decades, failed to produce any such evidence. Every conclusion it has attempted to offer has been met by a convincing counter, and every counterargument can in turn be dismantled. This has been going on for a long time now. It is not getting any better. It is not as if the perfectly worded propositional argument is on the horizon, ready to be universally accepted as an ontological discovery. At times, it looks less like philosophy and more like wordplay.

The blunt fact of the matter is this: that method ought by now to be considered a failure. If it has not worked so far, over the course of perhaps a hundred years, what reason do we have for thinking it might suddenly start working for us? I cannot imagine the scientific community, past or present, clinging to a method that so evidently does not work. They would have abandoned it long ago and either found a better one or given up entirely.

To summarise, with some degree of inaccuracy, the reason it has not and will never work is this: the world is complex and three-dimensional. It has a past and a future. It has billions of interconnected events, constantly changing and flowing from one moment to the next. A concept, on the other hand, is just a shadow, a thought inside a limited human mind. It is a picture, small and two-dimensional, and can never hope to contain the reality of what it represents. Rational arguments, divorced from context and data, can tell us only about the coherence of those concepts, and nothing about the world. If I am wrong, give me an example to illustrate it.

In anticipation, I offer three of my own.

Mary the Near-Omniscient Colour Scientist

Frank Jackson asks us to imagine a woman confined to a black-and-white room all of her life, where she, in spite of her circumstances, becomes obsessed with colour, to the extent that she learns every single physical fact about it. Jackson says that, were she one day to be freed from her monochromatic confinement and confront the redness of a rose for the first time, she would know something new about colour. Since she already knew every physical fact, the new knowledge must be non-physical, so offer support the claims of dualism.

The main issue with this is not that the plotline is far-fetched; that her skin would presumably also be a shade of grey, that there would be no mirrors with which to ascertain her hair or eye colour unless they too were black, white, or somewhere in between, not to mention the slightly awkward question of how she would approach menstruation. This implausibility, an unrealistic idealisation appears accepted and endorsed by the analytic tradition, is not the main problem. Nor is the issue that her experience may not be scientifically plausible, for

example because her colour receptors might not be capable at that point of perceiving colour.

No. The real issue is that what Jackson proposes is actually utterly inconceivable. Facts about colour are not the kind of thing that can be presented as a checklist. Science will never know every single fact about colour because this is not a coherent notion.

It is also logically unstable. According to physicalism, If Mary knew every physical fact about colour, then she would know what it looked like. If she did not know what it looked like, then she did not know every physical fact about colour. Frank Jackson does what too many ontological analytic thought experiments and arguments do: he places the conclusion, hiding in plain sight, that there are non-physical facts, into the basic premise of the whole argument. You have to already assume dualism over physicalism to accept the conclusion. It is mind-boggling, both that he would do such a thing, and that he would be taken seriously by his peers.

But this is what happens when you imagine a scenario, accepts it, however illogical and implausible it may be, and then attempt to draw conclusions about the world from what the scenario appears to indicate. It is a deep failure of analytic philosophy to accept, proliferate, and seriously discuss what amounts to nonsense.

David Chalmers and P-Zombies

A philosophical zombie is a mythical being invented to prove that consciousness and matter cannot be the same thing. A particular P-Zombie, let's call him Dave, cannot possibly or logically exist in the world we live in, because we have neuroscientific data showing clear interconnectedness between mind and brain. Chalmers acknowledges this, and so postulates, in a shocking misuse of modal logic, that Dave could still be conceivably alive in some alternate possible world. He might be going to work, enjoying football, or studying philosophy for all we know, obviously oblivious to his lack of inner awareness.

To keep things brief, this is another example where the notion of conceivability is stretched beyond its conceivable limits. A being physically identical to the self-aware Dave in our world would share the same evolutionary and personal history. They would share the same brain structure. Yet they would inexplicably differ in what must be considered one of their primary and necessary modes of being.

Perhaps the laws of biology work differently in that world, but even then we would need to understand those laws to decide whether or not P-Dave was truly conceivable. Chalmers is effectively saying that since we can imagine a world in which mind and brain are substantially different, then they must be substantially different. I cannot tell whether he is unaware of the fact that we can only imagine such a thing by assuming this difference in the first place.

Plantinga and the Maximally Great God of Possible Worlds

I want to preface this with the fact that my A-Level Philosophy students saw through this argument almost immediately. I always do my best to present each argument in its optimal light before encouraging critique, but on this occasion they could not wait. They noticed straight away that if you assume the opposite starting point, you reach the opposite conclusion, and that there is no independent reason to favour one assertion over the other.

Let me explain. Alvin Plantinga defines God as the maximally great being. He argues that the concept of a maximally great being contains no internal contradiction and is therefore possible. He then claims that to say something is possible is to say that there is at least one possible world in which it exists. So far, this is a standard and legitimate use of modal logic to test the internal consistency of a concept.

Plantinga then notes that, to be maximally great, such a being would have to exist in all possible worlds, including this one. This is the misuse of modal logic I was talking about. Plantinga's modal analysis of the concept of a maximally great being only tells us that the concept adheres to logic. It is a conclusion about the concept, about the words and ideas, and should never be presented as an ontological conclusion.

The same reasoning can operate in reverse. It is possible that a maximally great being does not exist, in the sense that there is no logical contradiction in its non-existence. If there is a possible world without a maximally great being, then by the same modal logic no possible world can contain one, including our real one. The difficulty is that you must once again assume the outcome in advance in order to derive the desired conclusion.

In the next part, I will show that this is not a local failure confined to modern thought experiments and modal logic, but indicative of a wider failure at the heart of the analytic approach to philosophy.

Author Note

This essay forms part of an ongoing philosophical project exploring perception, realism and morality drawing from philosophy and Vajrayana Buddhism.

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